The story of a night in a haunted house with wild noises all about, high words and pistol shots

THE IMPRISIONED GHOSTS

By ELEANOR VAN HORN

Here is a ghost that is finally traced to its lair and forever laid at rest

LOCAL historians used to call it Whitehall. That was in the days when one of Washington's officers lived there. Then, for immemorial years, the village folk called it the Haunted House. It was a mansion of stately build, approached from the main road by a sweep of imposing driveway. It was large and square, with a pillared porch. Its lofty front windows looked out across a once-beautiful garden, laid out like the gardens of Italy and France. But in the years of mystery and desertion, the garden, like the house, had fallen from grand magnificence into gentle decay. There were tangled masses of exotic flowers run wild. The box borders had been bitten out at intervals by the hungry winters of the past. There was a battered sun-dial, a dead fountain, moss-covered marble seat, and mysterious paths.

It was here that the village boys and I used to play when the sun shone cheerfully and the day was young. The house exerted its spell upon us. We peered fearfully in at the windows and shook the strong old doors, then scurried away with shrieks of half-frightened ecstasy. The house seemed to submit to these familiarities patiently. But it never lost, not even in the sunshine, that aspect of cheerless, unholy sorrow that made it awful.

Perhaps even then, subconsciously, I knew that I should spend a night of horror behind those white, unsmiling walls when I should have become a man.

II.

Here let me tell you something about the tragedy enacted there.

A quarter of a century before my birth, a wealthy bachelor, a grandson of that officer of Washington's already referred to, came to live at Whitehall, with an old housekeeper as his only attendant. He was not well known in the village, for his youth had been spent in foreign lands, and only till he came to live at Whitehall had the village people ever seen him.

He was tall and imposing, but his handsome face bore clearly the marks of a dissipated and tumultuous life. A scar marked his cheek. He walked with a slight limp from some old wound. He dressed carefully, and bore the aspect of a great gentleman—a man of the world, with an intangible something about him that baffled my youthful analysis, but which marked him with distinction in sharp contrast to the gentle village folk.

Vague rumors filtered into the village as time went on, which gradually revealed the inhabitant of Whitehall to have been a man of much adventure. He had roamed the wide world over; been in wars as a soldier of fortune; had been imprisoned, and had made his escape; was once an ornamental figure at the court of France, and a destroyer of many a woman's happiness.

His manners were those of a Chesterfield, although he was reserved and taciturn to the last degree, and made no man his friend. He lived entirely within himself. He came and went about the village in that isolation of spirit that some are capable of building up for themselves, and which is as impenetrable as the heart of a Sahara. He received no letters, but many books and magazines and papers. He spent long days in his library. Occasionally he walked in his great garden, gathering the flowers as if he loved them.

Thus he lived until the day of a tragic visit.

In those days a stage-coach carried mails and passengers to and from the village. People came and went every day, and the coach was always sure to be well filled; so that when a mysterious stranger, with a striking face and a foreign accent, was a passenger alighting at the village there were many to carry the news. The stranger's fine, erect figure was set off by a military coat. His beard was cut after a foreign fashion. When he asked at the inn how he might reach Whitehall, the word swiftly passed about that the lonely bachelor was to have a distinguished visitor.

The stranger gave the innkeeper a princely fee and was, in consequence, driven out to Whitehall in the inn-keeper's own private chaise by the innkeeper's son. The great door of Whitehall was opened by the old housekeeper, and the mysterious and attractive stranger swallowed from the sight of the youth, who looked longingly after him as he fingered the large silver coin in his hand.

And that night was a night of terror in the village. The old housekeeper had come running wildly to the nearest house in her nightgown, with her eyes starting from her head and her nightcap awry. She was incoherent with terror and exhaustion, but it was gained from her broken speech that a tragedy had taken place at Whitehall, and that the master and his visitor lay dead.

Some of the village men ran to the house, entered the door that had been left wide open by the frightened housekeeper, and went up the stairs to the room the master had converted into a library, led by a light that was still burning.

The room was in great disorder. Sure enough, both men lay dead, their faces bruised and marked. One, the stranger, had been strangled. As for the master, he had evidently shot himself. He lay within a large closet, the door of which stood wide open, and across the sill trickled a stream of crimson. Upon each victim was found a miniature of a woman of extraordinary beauty, her lovely face smiling out coquettishly—from within a frame of pearls in one case and a plain gold rim in the other.

Whitehall, after the tragedy, fell to some distant cousins, and they came to live there. They stayed but a short time, however, departing suddenly and leaving a caretaker in charge of the place. The caretaken, in turn, left hastily, declaring that he had heard weird sounds at night, accompanied by two pistol-shots, and that he knew that the ghosts of the two dead men enacted the tragedy every night in the old library.

Then the house was closed. The weeds sprang up in the garden and sprawled into the trim walks, and Whitehall had, within a year, become that strange eery thing—a haunted house.

III.

When my childhood had passed, and I had traveled about a good deal in foreign lands and learned what fine architecture really was, I realized that the Haunted House was of rare beauty and excellence, a gem of architecture such as one does not often chance upon in our good land, and so I looked upon its imposing frontage with longing, loving eyes.

I spent several summers in its vicinity in my early thirties, and each day I made it the object of a pilgrimage. I walked about its choked and neglected gardens, and examined its poor, weather-worn door-carvings with a pity that would have penetrated to its heart—had it had one. For Whitehall seemed to me to be weighted down with mortification and despair. The sun might shine its brightest upon its windows, but they never could be made to have that smiling look that the windows of happier houses have.

The spring of the year that I became engaged to Lydia, I paid a visit of a week to the old town, and, of course, to Whitehall. It was a lush season; Nature was doing her very bravest, and the old gardens of Whitehall were struggling to assert themselves. There were surprising clumps of fine, old-fashioned flowers here and there, holding up their beautiful heads, not proudly, but rather triumphantly after all the years of neglect. I grew more and more fascinated with the place; it appealed to me as never before. My being in love may have had a good deal to do with this; but each day I was drawn to the old house, and spent hours about it, and even obtained the keys and wandered into all its rooms, gloating over the rare woodwork and the strong, firm frame; and before I went away I had responded to a sudden inspiration, and had rented the place for a year, with the privilege of purchasing. The price was ridiculously low, the haunting spirits that one was obliged to take with it being considered detrimental to the real-estate value.

"You will hear and see things to-night."

I was to be married in July, and here I would bring my bride. I knew what a wonderful and joyful surprise it would be to Lydia—for she regarded all superstition with fine scorn. And what a place for a honeymoon! What romance that garden offered, what delight was promised in those grand old rooms, still stocked with gems of antique furniture, moth-eaten and dust-laden to be sure, but not beyond restoration. I left directions for its setting in order, and hired a brave man to make trim the gardens.

At last, we came to our own. The joy of those first weeks will remain a honeyed memory forever. We arranged and admired and recovered and repolished to our own particular taste until our artistic sense was completely satisfied. We worked and dreamed away the hours and talked much of the history of the place, laughing at the absurdity of the haunted idea and pitying the narrow beliefs of the simple people; but, at the same time, rejoicing over them because of the wealth of beauty they had contributed to our lives.

In September, Lydia was called to the bedside of her sister. She took the maid with her. The cook, who was left to take care of me, went to her own little home each night, so that I was quite alone in the house after nine o'clock. I was lonely, as a new bridegroom would be sure to be during such a separation, but I was happy enough in my own way.

The day before Lydia returned I received a call from one of the old residents of the town—the oldest inhabitant, I fancied, from his shriveled and faded condition. I welcomed him as a character. He came in the bright afternoon, but seemed wary about entering the house, even with the glorious sunshine pouring in at the windows in a flood, and said he preferred a seat in the garden. He walked feebly, leaning heavily on a stout stick, and breathlessly assured me that he would not have made so great an effort had he not been impelled by an overpowering curiosity as to whether we had been troubled by ghostly noises, and also by the desire to tell me that this was the anniversary of the tragedy. It was a windy September night that it happened, he said, and he quite remembered how Aunt Sally Waite shivered and shook in her nightgown when she brought the horrible news.

I cheerfully assured him that we had not seen or heard anything of a disquieting nature, and had no fear whatever.

He waved his palsied fingers warningly, and feebly shook his head as he said impressively: "You will yet, young man, you will. It's never failed to come on the night of the anniversary. You'll hear and see things to-night. This house has been haunted for nigh onto fifty year, and them that's lived here has always heard wild noises—groans and curses, high words, struggling, pistol-shots—two pistol-shots!"

Then, with a dramatic fervor that seemed like the good old man's last effort on this earth, he graphically rehearsed every detail of the ancient tragedy. In spite of myself, I felt all its horror and its reality.

When he had finished, he departed, creeping slowly away with many a backward look and ominous shakings of the head. I have to confess that he left a depressing effect, and I felt very lonely without Lydia. The golden days that we had reveled in seemed very far away; and much as I disliked to think of the gruesome past, I could not refrain from dwelling upon it with an awful fascination.

As night drew near, I found myself a prey to all the terrors of my youthful imaginings. Whitehall again became the Haunted House; and in spite of all of my efforts to stave it off, I was fast falling into a fit of the blues. By the time that the cook left I was genuinely depressed. The wind sprang up and moaned and sobbed dolefully about the house, sighing in the chimney and shrieking wildly under the eaves. I read very late, plunging into the lively action of the spirited Vicomte de Bragelonne, and hoped, like Stevenson, to carry the thread of that epic into my slumbers.

When midnight struck, the brands of the fire flashed up. Then went out. I laid down my stirring romance, stretched and yawned, and decided to go to bed and sleep off my hapless mood.

I got up and moved about the room noisily, whistled and sang, swept up the hearth, locked the doors and windows, and tried not to hear the fiendish wind. But I could not deny it. I was the victim of such a disquieting nervous tension as I had never before experienced in all my life.

When I got to bed I huddled under the blankets and watched the cold moonlight flooding across the floor—the very floor, I thought, upon which the tragedy took place; for my bedroom had been the unfortunate master's library. I was happy to find myself really growing drowsy, and was just on the verge of slumber when I was suddenly shocked wide-awake by a sharp report near at hand.

"A pistol-shot!" I whispered, my flesh creeping with an anomalous species of terror; for the sound came from the large closet in which the unfortunate inhabitant of Whitehall had died. It was now used as a storage-closet.

I had half decided that my over-stimulated fancy had been playing me a trick, and was about to settle back upon my pillow, when another report, louder, clearer, sharper, came from the region of the closet, and made me jerk back to my sitting position.

"Two pistol-shots," I said to myself in an ominous whisper, recalling the old man's words.

All of a sudden I grasped hold of my senses and got back my manhood, a keen disgust of myself hastening my actions. I jumped out of bed, lighted the lamp, and made my way toward the closed door of the closet. I held the lamp rather high, and its light shed itself sharply downward upon the floor where my eyes were attracted to something within its rays. I stooped—spreading slowly out across the sill from beneath the door was a crimson stain.

"Blood!" I whispered hoarsely, and my own ran cold. My terror returned. I felt a sudden ghastly faintness, and I nervously moistened my dry lips with my tongue. The hand holding the lamp shook as with an ague, and this seemed to arouse me to a sense of my weakness. I felt as if I had disgraced myself by the weak fears and nervous vacillations of this night, and, suddenly stung back into strength and courage by shame, I put out a steady hand and turned the knob. The door was locked. I shook it loudly and peered into the keyhole. There was no key within.

However, I was now determined to fathom the mystery, and, shivering in my thin nightclothes, I gathered keys from various doors up-stairs and tried them in the lock. The last one grated a little and then slid back, and the door was unlocked. I set my teeth a little and held my breath with excitement as I swung back the door, holding the light well forward and peering within. For a moment I could see nothing, and then meeting my eager gaze was—a row of preserve-jars, two of which had broken from fermentation and sent forth a crimson stream of fruit-juice!

"Lydia's preserves!" I said, and, setting the lamp down on the shelf, I gave myself up to a fit of uproarious laughter.

It is Lydia's chief story. She revels in the telling of it, but I do not mind. It gave me an interesting night, and we pride ourselves upon being the owners of one of the most beautiful old houses in the land.

A SOFT-HEARTED BURGLAR

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK A HARD LUCK STORY GETS THE PLUNDER

By E. V. COTTMAN

"We will drink to your better employment and my better fortune."

JERRY DEEMS, pickpocket and second-story man, paused a moment in his delicate work of removing a piece of glass from the dining room window in one of the fashionable houses on Riverside Drive. He listened carefully, but could not hear a sound. Outside the world lay peaceful and quiet, inside all was as silent as the tomb. Reassured by the favorable conditions, Jerry cautiously continued his operations, and in a few seconds a semi-circular piece was lifted out of the pane, a cautious hand slipped through and sprung the catch, and Jerry's portly form struggled through the open window.

Time was when he could slip through a window as lightly as the best of them, but several lengthy periods of enforced idleness "up the river" had rendered him somewhat corpulent, and his waist-line had not the small measure of former years.

It was long after midnight, and he was tired. This was not the first house Jerry had visited that night. He had made a few calls in another part of the city with satisfactory results, and by all means should now have been safely making for his quarters. But Jerry possessed a trait that many of us have—that of not letting well enough alone. This he soon realized, for when he straightened up to get his bearings, the light was suddenly flashed on, and he found himself looking into the steely mouth of a six-shooter, in the hands of a tall, slender woman.

"Well, I'll be—" he exclaimed, and sat down heavily in a chair that happened to be near the window.

"Surprised, are you?" asked a cool, mocking voice. "I think I am the one to be surprised. My visitors do not usually enter through the window."

She stood there, calm and smiling, holding the pistol in a way that plainly showed that she knew how to use it. She was dressed in a loose pink bath-robe, and had a lace scarf twisted about her head.

"Don't move," she said. "Now put your hands on the table." Jerry did so, and she looked him over scornfully with her bright eyes.

"Well, mum," said Jerry in a sheepish tone, "I'm yer meat. You certainly got me dead to rights."

As he spoke he gave a furtive glance around the room. Her keen eyes followed his gaze as he measured the distance from the chair to the window.

"I wouldn't try that, if I were you," she said. "I mean business, and I'll shoot at your first move."

"All right, lady, all right," said Jerry. "Sing out and let's git it over. It's me for the pen, I guess."

"Not so fast," she answered. "I've always wanted to meet a real, live burglar, and now that I've got my wish I want to ask you a few questions."

"Well, start the ball rollin'," said Jerry, who was getting disgusted with the whole affair. "Does you want to know what church I goes to, or would you like to know if I'm married or single?"

The lady smiled. "Neither," she said, "but I would like to know why an able-bodied man like you can't find something better to do than sneaking into other people's houses in the night? Isn't there plenty of work for a man to do that is honest and respectable?

"Do you mean to say that you can't make a living without taking what doesn't belong to you? Why can't you drive a wagon, or work in a mill, or do something to earn an honest living?"

Jerry squirmed uneasily in his chair. "Cut it out, mum," he said, raising a wrathful pair of eyes to hers. "Cut it out! I didn't come out to-night to listen to a sermon on honesty. If you're goin' to call de cops, do it, an' hold yer jaw, fer I ain't in no humor just about now to be guyed."

"But you haven't answered me," persisted the lady. "Why don't you work—"

"Work!" broke in Jerry. "You're a perty dame to be talkin' about work. Have you ever worked in yer life? What do you know 'bout work?

"Have you ever been hungry or slept in the street? Have you ever tried ter git er job that paid livin' wages? Of course you ain't. It's fine ter talk when yer pocket's full o' money, an' yer bank account's a mile long! What d'you know about bein' broke!"

"I know more about it than you think," she returned, letting a little warmth creep into her dark eyes. "For that is precisely the position I find myself in at present."

"You broke!" exclaimed Jerry incredulously, throwing his eyes around the richly furnished room. "You broke! Livin' in this house! Look at de silver over there. Pshaw! What yer givin' me!"

"Nothing but the truth. We are ruined. My husband's fortune is swept away, this house is mortgaged, my jewels—even my very dresses—have been sold. It is only a question of a few hours when I'll be out in the world without a penny.

"The silver on the sideboard is the only thing that is left, and it will go tomorrow. It wouldn't be here now, but for the monograms. So, you see, I know a little about trouble myself."

"Is what yer givin' me on the level, lady?" asked Jerry as she closed her eyes wearily for a moment.

"It certainly is," she replied. "Can't you see how hard it is for me? One can never judge by appearances. A rich dress does not always cover a light heart, and a smile often hides a tear. I suppose that there are many people who have envied me, never dreaming that I have been living on the brink of ruin for months.

"The end has come sooner than I expected. Tomorrow will be Easter Sunday. I have forgotten that it was so near," passing a slender hand wearily across her face.

"Well," with a bitter laugh, "my Easter gown won't create a furore tomorrow.

"Come," she said, rousing herself and turning to Jerry, "it is time you were off."

He opened his eyes in astonishment. "You don't mean ter let me go?" he asked.

"Certainly," she answered with a faint smile. "I wouldn't turn a dog over to the police on Easter Eve. Come, be quick! It will soon be morning, and daylight will overtake you."

Jerry looked at her in a perplexed manner. "Say, lady," he said in a voice shaking with feeling, "I'm sure sorry yer up against it."

"Thanks for your sympathy," she said gratefully. "And now, if you will pass me that decanter and those goblets behind you on the sideboard, we will drink to your better employment and my better fortune."

"Thank you," as he filled the heavily chased cup and handed it to her. She raised it to her lips and said, "To your future health and prosperity."

"Same to you," warmly responded Jerry, smacking his lips and setting the goblet on the table. She made a quick gesture with her hand.

"Take it with you as a souvenir of our meeting," she said graciously.

"T'anks, lady," said Jerry, stowing it away in his pocket.

Then he added:

"Since you was so white to a fellow, I'd like to give you a souverine meself. Yer see," taking a small, carefully wrapped bundle from his pocket and opening it, "I didn't meet with no setbacks tonight before I struck this crib, and you can see fer yerself," revealing a number of jeweled rings, pins, necklaces and bracelets to her astonished vision, "so if you will kindly accept this necklace," holding up a beautiful string of diamonds and emeralds, "I'd be mighty proud ter give it ter you."

"Why—I don't like—" she gasped.

"Oh, take it, take it," urged Jerry, closing up the bundle and stuffing it back into his pocket. "Easy come, easy go, yer know.

"Well, so long, and good luck," he whispered, as he swung himself softly from the window onto the roof and disappeared.

Several minutes passed. The lady stood holding the necklace in her hand, watching the light flash and scintillate on the gleaming stones. She pursed up her lips and gave a low whistle.

"What a beauty!" she cried. "Worth five thousand dollars at least. Oh, the fool, the fool!"

Slowly she unwound the lace scarf from a sleek, black head, closely cropped, and slipped out of the enveloping folds of the pink bath-robe, standing revealed as a young man, lithe and slender.

"Luckily for me I came through the bathroom and heard him first," he said to himself, bringing up a dark lantern and a black mask from somewhere under the table. With one hand on the electric-button he looked cautiously about, then turned out the light, climbed softly through the window, and was gone in the night.

SOME PROVERBS FROM THE GERMAN

A dead dog has no teeth.

Nothing is more ridiculous than an old man in love.

Old age is not free from folly.

It is a worthless hen that lays for your neighbors.

Rumor is a great liar.

The more you rake muck, the worse it smells.

The more enemies you have, the greater is your station.

All do not sleep who snore.

Trust not either a wind that is favorable or a ruler who laughs.

When wolf eats wolf there must be a famine in the forest.

If luck will have it so, even a bull can bring forth a calf.

Do not be influenced by the tears of a woman, by the limping of a dog, or by the promises of a trader.

Beware the cat which licks your face and then scratches you from behind.

He serves a bad master who serves the multitude.

Not years but worries make men old.

Shut the doors of your house to those who always speak the truth.

They who hunt with cats will catch mice.

Learn to endure if you wish to succeed.

There is no need to look back upon him who acts kindly.

No river is so deep as to have no bottom.

No collar is proof against the hangman's rope.

We cannot deceive an empty stomach.

Every dog is brave on its own doorstep.

Every fool makes a hundred others.

No one winces at another's pain.

A criminal shuns the daylight as a devil does the cross.

A child often gets kisses that are meant for its mother.

He who wishes to gain control of everything will be in need of everything.

Petty thieves are hanged; great thieves are asked to dinner.

Everything is wasted that is given to a thankless person.